Gary Brauchla’s great race

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Gary & Kathie Brauchla

Before he died, Gary Brauchla always had it in the back of his mind that he wanted to run a 5k. It took his death to make it happen.

His remarkable journey from death to the completion of his first 3.1-mile run began sometime around 3 a.m in the early morning of Sept. 29, 2012, when the home builder went into cardiac arrest as he slept in his rural home about 90 miles from Tucson.

Earlier that evening, he had complained of pain in his right shoulder, but shrugged it off since he had had chili for dinner and thought he might be experiencing indigestion.

Later, his wife, Kathie, was awoken by a loud snort, which she assumed then was snoring. In retrospect, it was probably her husband’s last gasp. She nudged him. Nothing. Nudged him again. Nothing. Pushed harder a third time. No response. “Then it all clicked together what was going on,” she recalled. “I flipped the light on and he was not breathing.”

A former surgical technician for 15 years, Kathie immediately started CPR, called 911 and sustained the chest compressions until help arrived. The wait was excruciating. The sound of the diesel engines of emergency vehicles never sounded so good. A defibrillator restored his heart rhythm.

Brauchla was flown by helicopter to Tucson Medical Center, where doctors induced a coma, put in some coronary stents to reopen blocked arteries and cooled his body temperature through therapeutic hypothermia in order to reduce the brain’s oxygen requirements and reduce the chance of brain injury.
He would remain in a coma for 2.5 weeks, while loved ones wondered about the degree of brain damage he may have sustained.

He was already unspeakably fortunate. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 300,000 people in the U.S. experience a cardiac arrest outside of a hospital setting. More than 92 percent of them die. But he would be more fortunate still. He fully recovered.

“By doing everything TMC did, I am still here physically and mentally,” Brauchla said.

Once he was strong enough, his cardiologist wrote a prescription for him to attend the cardiac rehabilitation program at Tucson Medical Center to rebuild his strength and heart. Even though it is a 90-mile drive from his home in Pearce, Arizona, he attends three days a week.

He’s taking advantage of the program’s nutritional training, watching his diet and making conscious choices about the fuel he gives his body. And he appreciates that experienced staff is monitoring his heartbeat, making sure he is exercising safely but also challenging his heart, under proper supervision.

And on June 1, at 68 years old, he ran his 5k, at the TMC-sponsored Meet Me Downtown 5k Night Run/Walk.

He finished middle of the pack. But he figures that’s pretty good for a guy who faced down death.

“I was given a gift of life,” Brauchla said, adding he has become an advocate of making sure rural areas have access to automatic electronic defibrillators and promoting CPR. “My wife, God bless her, saved my life.”

Brauchla also volunteers at TMC’s cardiac ward four times a month, calming the fears of new patients about what the future holds. “I have a pretty good story I can tell,” he says. “Heart attacks are not necessarily a death knell. You can heal yourself, but you have to take steps to do it.”

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